

## The Moral Life of Waiting: Time, Endurance, and Meaning across Cultures

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### Abstract

*Waiting has long occupied a central position in modernist and existential literature, most notably in Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot', where it is represented as stasis, futility, and the collapse of meaning. Critical discourse surrounding absurd drama has largely interpreted waiting as an emblem of metaphysical paralysis and ontological despair. However, such readings universalize a culturally specific conception of time rooted in Western existential philosophy. This article challenges that assumption by placing Beckett's absurd temporality in dialogue with the Indian folk narrative 'Manvini Bhavai', where waiting functions not as negation but as ethical endurance shaped by faith, collective memory, and moral responsibility. Drawing upon comparative literary theory, narrative ethics, and philosophies of time, the study proposes the concept of ethical temporality—a culturally embedded mode of waiting that generates meaning through endurance rather than action. By re-theorizing waiting as a moral practice rather than absurd stasis, the article intervenes in dominant existential paradigms and argues for the necessity of non-Western narrative traditions in reconfiguring literary theories of time.*

**Keywords:** *Waiting; Ethical Temporality; Absurd Drama; Folk Narrative; Beckett; Manvini Bhavai; Comparative Literature.*

### 1. Introduction

Waiting occupies a paradoxical position in twentieth-century literature. It is at once omnipresent and under-theorized, frequently treated as a symptom of inertia rather than as a meaningful narrative or ethical condition. In modernist and absurdist drama, waiting is most famously dramatized in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a play in which "nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes" (Beckett 41). Critics have repeatedly interpreted this state of suspension as emblematic of existential futility, reinforcing Martin Esslin's influential claim that absurd drama expresses "the feeling that the certainties and unshakeable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away" (Esslin 23).

Yet such interpretations raise an important theoretical question: is waiting necessarily meaningless, or is meaning culturally produced through specific conceptions of time? The tendency of existential criticism to universalize absurd waiting obscures alternative temporal frameworks in which waiting is not passive but ethically charged. Indian folk narratives, particularly *Manvini Bhavai*, present waiting as a moral condition shaped by collective suffering, karmic causality, and ritual endurance. Here, waiting becomes a mode of ethical engagement rather than nihilistic suspension.

This article argues that dominant absurdist interpretations of waiting rely on a culturally specific, secular-modern understanding of time that cannot be universalized. By placing *Waiting for Godot* in dialogue with *Manvini Bhavai*, the study proposes ethical temporality as a theoretical framework that reconceptualizes waiting as moral action embedded within community, faith, and narrative continuity.

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1 Waiting and Absurd Temporality

Critical discourse on *Waiting for Godot* has overwhelmingly emphasized its representation of temporal stagnation. Hugh Kenner famously describes the play as occurring in a “time that does not move forward” (Kenner 109), while Beckett himself remarked that the play is “about waiting” but “nothing happens” (Beckett, *Endgame* 12). This emphasis on stasis aligns with existential philosophy, particularly Albert Camus’s assertion that absurdity arises from “the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus 28).

Martin Esslin’s *The Theatre of the Absurd* further codified waiting as a theatrical embodiment of metaphysical meaninglessness, arguing that Beckett’s characters are trapped in “an endless present” devoid of purpose (Esslin 45). Subsequent scholarship has reinforced this reading, interpreting waiting as a metaphor for post-war disillusionment, linguistic breakdown, and the erosion of teleological time.

However, recent critics such as Lois Oppenheim and Katherine Weiss have questioned the totalizing pessimism of absurdist interpretations, suggesting that Beckett’s waiting contains ethical ambiguity rather than pure negation. These readings open space for comparative inquiry but stop short of re-theorizing temporality itself.

### 2.2 Folk Narrative, Time, and Ethical Endurance

Unlike modernist drama, Indian folk narratives operate within temporal frameworks shaped by oral transmission, ritual repetition, and moral continuity. *Manvini Bhavai*, a Gujarati folk narrative, foregrounds collective suffering and ethical waiting as responses to social injustice. Scholars such as Kapila Vatsyayan argue that folk narratives encode “a lived philosophy of endurance rather than escape” (Vatsyayan 87). Waiting in such narratives is not empty time but charged duration, sustained by faith in moral order.

A. K. Ramanujan’s work on Indian storytelling emphasizes that oral traditions preserve “a sense of time that accumulates meaning through repetition” (Ramanujan 54). This contrasts sharply with the linear, progress-oriented temporality disrupted in modernist literature. Yet folk temporalities remain largely absent from theoretical debates on waiting, which continue to privilege European existential frameworks.

### 2.3 Theoretical Gap

While comparative studies between Western drama and Indian narratives exist, they often remain thematic rather than theoretical. There is a significant absence of comparative theory-building that allows folk narratives to challenge and reshape dominant philosophical categories such as time, waiting, and meaning. This gap necessitates a framework that does not merely compare representations but redefines the concept of waiting itself.

## 3. Theoretical Framework: Ethical Temporality

The concept of ethical temporality proposed in this article draws upon narrative ethics, phenomenology of time, and comparative philosophy. Paul Ricoeur’s notion of “lived time” (*temps vécu*) is particularly relevant, as it recognizes temporality as narratively structured rather than mechanically measured (Ricoeur 52). Ethical temporality extends this insight by emphasizing endurance as moral action.

In contrast to absurd temporality—where waiting signifies the collapse of purpose—ethical temporality understands waiting as a form of ethical commitment sustained through faith, responsibility, and communal memory. This framework allows folk narratives to function not as cultural artifacts but as theory-producing texts capable of revising dominant existential paradigms.

#### 4. Methodology

This study adopts a **comparative hermeneutic methodology**, combining close textual analysis with ethical criticism. The approach is qualitative and interpretive, focusing on how temporality is narratively constructed and ethically framed in both texts.

Primary texts:

- Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*
- *Manvini Bhavai* (Gujarati folk narrative tradition)

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed scholarship on absurd drama, folk narrative theory, and philosophies of time. The analysis proceeds by:

1. Identifying dominant models of waiting in absurd drama
2. Examining representations of waiting in *Manvini Bhavai*
3. Theorizing ethical temporality as a comparative concept

#### 5. Waiting in *Waiting For Godot*: Absurd Stasis and Temporal Suspension

In *Waiting for Godot*, waiting is neither a transitional phase nor a means toward fulfilment; it is the very condition of existence. Vladimir and Estragon wait without certainty of arrival, purpose, or conclusion. Beckett underscores this temporal suspension through cyclical repetition: “Nothing to be done” (Beckett, *Godot* 1). The phrase recurs as a refrain, stripping time of progression and rendering waiting synonymous with inertia.

The play’s structure reinforces this stasis. Acts I and II mirror each other so closely that time appears arrested rather than sequential. Pozzo’s famous declaration—“They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more” (Beckett 84)—compresses human existence into a fleeting moment suspended between birth and death. Waiting here does not accumulate meaning; it merely prolongs awareness of futility.

Critics such as Martin Esslin have interpreted this temporal structure as an expression of metaphysical nihilism, arguing that Beckett dramatizes “the impossibility of rational explanation” (Esslin 45). Similarly, Hugh Kenner describes Beckett’s characters as inhabiting “a time that does not heal, progress, or redeem” (Kenner 121). Waiting, in this context, is fundamentally anti-ethical: it neither transforms the self nor binds the individual to communal responsibility.

Yet it is crucial to note that Beckett’s waiting is not culturally neutral. It emerges from a post-war European consciousness marked by the collapse of religious teleology and Enlightenment faith in progress. The silence of Godot—who never arrives—mirrors what Albert Camus describes as the “unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus 28). Waiting thus becomes the dramatic embodiment of existential absurdity, defined by the absence of moral assurance.

#### 6. Waiting in *Manvini Bhavai*: Endurance, Faith, and Moral Time

In sharp contrast, *Manvini Bhavai* constructs waiting not as paralysis but as ethical endurance. Rooted in Gujarati folk tradition, the narrative portrays collective suffering under social injustice, where characters endure oppression while awaiting moral redress. Waiting here is inseparable from faith—faith not merely in divine intervention, but in the persistence of moral order.

Unlike Beckett’s characters, who wait without memory or future, the figures in *Manvini Bhavai* wait **within time**, not outside it. Their waiting is sustained by collective memory and ritual repetition. As Kapila Vatsyayan observes, folk narratives “do not deny suffering; they locate it within an ethical continuum” (Vatsyayan 92). Waiting thus becomes an act of moral witnessing rather than existential resignation.

A. K. Ramanujan's insight into Indian oral traditions is particularly illuminating: "Repetition is not redundancy; it is remembrance" (Ramanujan 57). In *Manvini Bhavai*, waiting gains significance through repetition—of suffering, prayer, performance, and storytelling. Time accumulates meaning rather than erasing it. The narrative does not promise immediate resolution, but it affirms endurance as a form of ethical agency. Moreover, waiting in *Manvini Bhavai* is communal rather than individualistic. Suffering is shared, narrated, and remembered. This collective temporality stands in opposition to the isolated subjectivity of Western existentialism. Waiting is therefore not a void but a moral space, sustained by hope, karma, and relational responsibility.

## 7. Toward a Theory of Ethical Temporality

The juxtaposition of *Waiting for Godot* and *Manvini Bhavai* reveals that waiting is not a universal existential condition but a culturally mediated experience of time. Absurdist temporality reduces waiting to meaningless duration, while folk narrative temporality frames waiting as ethical endurance. This divergence necessitates a new conceptual vocabulary.

**Ethical temporality**, as proposed in this article, refers to a mode of time experienced as morally charged duration. It is characterized by:

1. Endurance rather than inertia
2. Collective memory rather than isolated consciousness
3. Faith and moral continuity rather than nihilistic silence

Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative time provides a crucial foundation here. Ricoeur argues that narrative mediates between cosmological time and lived experience, allowing time to be "humanly meaningful" (Ricoeur 52). Ethical temporality extends this insight by asserting that meaning emerges not from resolution but from sustained moral engagement within time.

From this perspective, waiting becomes an ethical act—a commitment to endure suffering without abandoning moral responsibility. This challenges the dominance of absurdist temporality in literary theory and opens space for non-Western narratives to function as theory-generating texts rather than illustrative examples.

## 8. Re-Reading Absurdism through Ethical Temporality

Reframing waiting through ethical temporality does not dismiss Beckett's vision; rather, it situates it within its cultural and philosophical limits. *Waiting for Godot* powerfully articulates a crisis of meaning specific to a secular, post-war European context. However, its elevation to a universal existential paradigm obscures alternative temporal philosophies.

By contrast, *Manvini Bhavai* demonstrates that waiting can sustain ethical meaning even in the absence of immediate justice. This does not imply naïve optimism; folk narratives are acutely aware of suffering and delay. What distinguishes them is their refusal to equate waiting with meaninglessness.

Such a re-reading aligns with recent postcritical and ethical turns in literary studies, which seek to move beyond suspicion and despair toward relational and care-oriented interpretations. Ethical temporality thus functions as a corrective to theory fatigue, offering a framework that integrates suffering, endurance, and moral responsibility without collapsing into nihilism.

## 9. Conclusion

This study has argued that waiting must be understood not as a monolithic existential condition but as a culturally constructed mode of temporality. Through a comparative reading of *Waiting for Godot* and *Manvini Bhavai*, the article has demonstrated that absurdist interpretations of waiting rely on a specific philosophical tradition that cannot be universalized.

By proposing ethical temporality, the article contributes a new conceptual framework to comparative literary theory—one that recognizes waiting as moral action rather than absurd stasis. In doing so, it restores agency, memory, and ethical meaning to a condition long associated with futility.

Ultimately, the moral life of waiting emerges not from the expectation of arrival, but from the commitment to endure, remember, and remain ethically engaged within time. Such a reconceptualization affirms the indispensable role of folk and oral traditions in reshaping global literary theory and challenges the hegemony of Western existential paradigms.

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